

## **Ronnie has his world on a string Puppeteer's new stage show is an astonishing tour de force**

**By Jerry Wasserman, *The Province*, Vancouver, January 22, 2009**

### BILLY TWINKLE: REQUIEM FOR A GOLDEN BOY

Ronnie Burkett is simply one of the geniuses of world theatre and a Canadian cultural treasure. Every few years he and his Theatre of Marionettes come to Vancouver with an astonishing new show. Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy is here for the PuSh Festival, then goes to the U.K. and Australia before returning to Canada in 2010. After the international tour Burkett usually "retires" the production.

So this will likely be your only chance to see this remarkable work. Don't miss it.

Burkett writes and performs each show himself, voicing all the characters and manipulating the dozens of life-like marionettes which he also designs along with their costumes and set. He often engages in fast-paced conversations between distinctive characters, each with a different accent, pitch and rhythm, never missing a beat or stumbling over a line, all while moving the marionettes in the most subtly expressive ways. The sheer talent and extraordinary physical dexterity on display are formidable.

Billy Twinkle opens with a puppetry tour de force. A two-foot-high marionette character bats her eyes, then starts throwing off parts of her costume -- mink stole, skirt, top, bra -- finally revealing herself as Rusty Knockers, stripper. It's an amazing few moments. Yet the rest of the show is about how routine these tricks are, and how the real master puppeteer aspires to something greater, something transcendent.

Turns out Rusty is part of the "Stars in Miniature" act of puppet-master Billy Twinkle, played by Burkett himself and a variety of marionettes representing Billy at various ages. Billy is deep in mid-life crisis, reduced to tacky cruise-ship entertainments. He's called back from the brink of suicide by his dead teacher and mentor, Sid Diamond (a hand-puppet), who leads him through a recap of his life and career.

We revisit Billy as a gawky boy growing up gay in Moose Jaw, developing his strange attachment to puppetry, meeting other odd folk with a similar addiction, and gradually creating his own act -- which means we watch Burkett manipulating marionette Billy manipulating tiny marionettes of his own.

Many of the characters are unforgettable: adenoidal Benjy, an aspiring puppeteer who takes a different life path than Billy; drunken diva Madame Brewster, who slugs back the wine while singing; hapless wannabe puppeteer Doreen Gray who raps hilariously for Jesus and turns out to be the wisest of all.

The self-referential material makes this show feel a little self-indulgent, and at nearly two hours without intermission it sometimes feels padded, too. But these are tiny flaws amid the superb intelligence, marvelous craft and delicious humour of a masterful artist at the height of his powers.

jerry.wasserman@vancouverplays.com  
© Copyright (c) The Province